



Charlotte Mason's House of Education,
Scale How, Ambleside, UK, 2009

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AN IDEAL NURSERY.

BY C. SHARR.

BEFORE I describe my ideal of what a nursery should be, I must, in a few words, sketch the nursery most commonly found in a modern dwelling-house. The room usually designated by that name is a small one at the top of the house, with a low lean-to ceiling and a window placed so high up that it is impossible for the child to see out, even when on tiptoe. If he does attain the object of his desire his eye is generally greeted with chimneys or the top windows of the opposite house, a blank wall, or, occasionally, the top of a tree and a patch of the sky. And this is the only glimpse of nature the child is allowed during the long long hours in the nursery.

To turn again to the inside of the room. In the far corner is a fire grate with a small fire. Round the room are two or three mutilated chairs, a rickety table and a box or cupboard filled with useless broken toys. These the children cannot use, and having nothing better to do, they spend their time in carrying the work of destruction still further. Glancing round the walls of the apartment, the eye is irritated by torn pictures half unnailed, and covered with dust. A few advertisements may suffice for them or a faded picture or two, which are not considered decent enough for any other room. The walls, if papered, are so disfigured and faded, that they have lost all pretence at design and add a still more gloomy aspect to the room. This is the nursery one continually meets with in visiting suburban houses. I have seen worse even than this, and, of course, have seen better.

At this point in my discourse I would ask my readers to think earnestly whether it has ever occurred to them that the character of their child, with comparatively few exceptions, is moulded during the early years of childhood, while he is still in the nursery, and that the habits contracted in those tender years are the foundations of his whole

future career. It is a matter not to be lightly cast aside, but should be allowed its rightful place in the thoughts continually traversing our mental sphere.

To begin with the awakening consciousness of the child; bring your thoughts to bear upon the mind acting in his tiny physical organism. How shall I explain it to you? He is fresh from the lofty realms of God, and placed in your care that you may reveal all that is highest and most beautiful in his nature, that you may train him for life in the world of men, or, in a word, make him worthy of the name he bears—of your name.

Think then, what the impression will be upon the sensitive plate of the child's inward vision, if we present to him conditions such as I have already described. Will the inharmonious vibrations which strike against his mental vision produce a pleasing, artistic picture, a picture which creates a lofty mind, full of beautiful ideas and aspirations such as can be traced on the sensitive plate of a camera, or will the image become "fogged," thereby presenting a perverted impression?

It cannot be too clearly understood how deep and lasting are the impressions a child receives during the nursery period of life. The ideas first impressed upon his mind are the most visible objects of his surroundings, and these, therefore, should have our first consideration. The nursery period of a child's life, for whose welfare I am about to make an appeal, is the time when his world is confined to the house and garden in which he lives and more particularly his own quarters, the day and night nurseries. Such children average from one to four or five years of age; after then, they enter the second stage of their lives known as the schoolroom period. A perfect nursery should be on the ground floor with south aspect, and windows opening out on to the garden; but as this can seldom be arranged, a room higher up, with windows overlooking the garden, will make a good substitute. The nursery should be airy but not too lofty, otherwise a greater amount of artificial heat is required, and it becomes more difficult to keep the temperature uniform. The floor should be covered with cork flooring, such as is used in bath rooms, of a nice green or red or any other pretty colour; this material cannot be overestimated in its value; it far

excels carpets or linoleum, being warm, thick and easily cleaned. A good rug should be placed before the fire, with a cloth for the table and curtains of similar tone. Two or three large chairs are necessary for general use, but it is most important of all to have somewhere in the room a tiny chair for each child, suited to his size, so that when sitting his feet rest comfortably on the ground, and to match this there should be a table of corresponding height. The centre of the room should be free for play or games, and for tiny children it is a mistake to think that numerous toys are necessary; give the boys a hammer, nails and wood, and the girls an old-fashioned Dutch doll that cannot be broken, and there is need for little else. A strong box of bricks, a cart and horse, and a doll's perambulator are all the toys they require; the rest they can make for themselves.

It is valuable training for a child, even in these early years, to make his own toys; the ingenuity and mental effort required are never lost, though apparently small results are attained at the time, but the mere fact of setting to work and accomplishing some result is worth more than the most expensive toy you may buy. "Something attempted, something done," is a grand maxim, and when the result is obtained, the child acquires a feeling of strength and superiority beyond anything he has felt before; and the pleasurable excitement he exhibits creates a keen desire to repeat the effort, and with repetition things become easy; it is only by continual telling that a child learns to use one hand for his spoon instead of two, and it is only by continual mental effort and exercise that his mind can be properly developed and expanded. Besides taking from him all creative faculty, giving him toys instead of letting him make them not infrequently causes dissatisfaction, and a craving for variety arises. He sees constantly around him an abundance of fragile mechanical toys and for a while his senses are fascinated; but the machinery is so slight that a very small jerk is sufficient to break it; it is then thrust aside as useless and there it remains, so far as the child is concerned—he has no more use for it. Frequently in the house of wealthy parents, who do not realise the folly of satiating their children with toys, one sees shelves and cupboards full of beautiful and costly playthings, and yet the

inmate of the nursery is pouting by the window, complaining that he has nothing to do and nothing to play with. A child who is not taught to help himself loses the faculty of doing so and becomes a burden to himself and to those around him; physically he is seriously injured; his arms and wrists acquire no strength, and his fingers become clumsy and grow less adapted to manipulate his handiwork, because every year that a child's muscles are left untrained, they grow less pliable and elastic. Mentally he is affected too, for what acts on one plane reacts on all; his mind, instead of expanding with its creative faculty, becomes dwarfed and stunted, he relies on things being done for him instead of doing them himself, his mental vision becomes narrowed to the limit of his capability and discord arises. Morally too his character is damaged; in accomplishing his feat, he gains in determination and will power; in failure the child's character is weakened, and if we continue to weaken rather than strengthen his moral nature, we not only prepare a rod for our own backs, but inflict an irreparable injury on the child, which he may not overcome even in manhood. Therefore I would rather give him nothing, than overload him with useless toys; for, be assured, nature provides abundantly for all who seek to learn, even though it be in play.

A large cupboard should be found in the nursery, and a shelf apportioned to each child, where he can keep his books and treasures; every evening it is the duty of mother or nurse to glance over the shelf and see that everything is neatly arranged, and, if there should be disorder anywhere, to make the culprit put it straight before going to bed; it is a bad beginning to a fresh day to open the cupboard door, and see nothing but disorder within. A neat row of shelves, on the contrary, has a pleasing and happy effect, and cannot fail to educate the child's sense of neatness and order.

A small feather bed also is a most useful accessory to the nursery where tiny babies are among its inmates; on this it can spend many happy hours stretching its little limbs before the fire. Also a sand tray and a box of clay for modelling are invaluable requisites; hours can be spent fashioning objects where children are allowed these privileges, and there is no play more instructive than the variety

of forms which can be moulded and remoulded out of a lump of clay, or on a sand tray. It is so much better to supply the materials with which things can be made than the things themselves. Thus, so far as movable objects resting on the floor are concerned, the nursery is complete. And now as regards the walls; these should be painted, as this is by far the most hygienic method of covering them. They can then be washed down at intervals, and do not harbour dirt to the same extent that paper does; the adornment of them should be the result of the parents' careful study of the child's nature; watch and note the result of his inventive faculties, and furnish pictures which give a correct and beautiful idea of the thought they are intended to convey; whether it be a farmyard, blacksmith's forge, woodland, stream, or seaside view, it should be true to life in colour and detail. Many people think a child does not notice the pictures in his nursery; such often speak only too truly, for in many instances they are not worth noticing, and even if they are, as likely as not they have no connection with the child's mind, and therefore fail to arouse his sympathy and interest. A child's taste for pictures must be educated; in choosing suitable pictures for children, I have always found it best to tell them stories of a high moral tone, and those that take the greatest hold of their imagination will help them most to develop their higher nature. I would then buy a picture representing the ideas as nearly as possible. A picture for each child is the best, given to him as his own property; each child is different, and his own picture will appeal to him in a degree that no other will; frequently through the day the little one's eye will wander up to it, and the eye accustomed to meet with a beautiful effect will cultivate a taste for artistic soft colouring early in life, which is so difficult to attain in maturer years. Pictures are an invaluable training in child life; they create wonder and awe in his little breast; a desire for knowledge of his being, life and surroundings will gradually dawn, and all that is imaginative and poetic in his nature responds to the silent appeal of a picture. Upon the wall in some corner may also be nailed a yard of American cloth upon which he can draw with white and coloured blackboard chalks. The institution of this impromptu blackboard is a realm of

individual delight and pleasure to the little artist, besides strengthening his wrists and hands.

Lastly, and most important of all, but perhaps the most neglected item of the nursery, is the bowl of fresh flowers on the table and the plants and seeds tended by the children in the window or in safe corners of the room where there is plenty of light and sunshine. Flowers are an essential part of child life; they call for his special care and attention, and the beautiful thoughts and feelings aroused by these silent messengers of love are the first instruments through which the child aspires to the Divine life slumbering within him.

Be assured that the attention we bestow on the environment of our children, and all the efforts we expend in brightening and developing their lives, will be amply repaid by the quickened intelligence and joyous interest evinced by the little ones, whose welfare claims so much of our thought.